

Submission and Liberation in the theatre of the Identical: *La mysterique* and Lars von Trier
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Most mainstream films allow the viewers to enact a distance between themselves and the characters cavorting on celluloid in front of him. The viewer, as well as the film itself, is safely ensconced within the realm of the Symbolic, a place where the visual is fittingly embodied and the viewer is invited to judge, comprehend and theorize. In his Goldenheart Trilogy – Breaking the Waves (1996), The Idiots (1998) and Dancer in the Dark (2000) – director Lars von Trier pulls the viewer out of this safe viewing space. His films force the viewer into another confusing realm; a realm where the films, though following a narrative structure, seem simultaneously to resist meaning, invite all meaning and dissolve the rational distance between the viewer and the celluloid. This is accomplished partially through the enactment, on the part of von Trier's golden-hearted naïve heroines, of Luce Irigaray's concept of *la mysterique*. I would go so far as to argue, in fact, that the female leads in von Trier's trilogy are a portrayal of not only *la mysterique* but Irigaray's *la mysterique* par excellence – Jesus Christ.

The suffering of von Trier's heroines in a series of films that are about, essentially, “goodness”, can be read as a sort of battle for the feminine within the concrete walls of the Symbolic realm. Irigaray's concept of *la mysterique* is the position wherein the feminine can find safe shelter – an authentically feminine subject position – when all other possibilities are, at root, male. *La mysterique* creates a space within which it is possible think of woman as such. Irigaray associates her *la mysterique* and women in general, with the/an idea of God. Woman and God, Irigaray will argue, are repressed in the same fashion within a patriarchal discourse – they are the unrepresentable forced to be represented in language – and they are both liberated sensorially through the position/role/sphere of *la mysterique*. The central characters of the three Goldenheart films take on this position of *la mysterique*; through an examination of Breaking the Waves I shall demonstrate the difficulty of its realization.

Irigaray developed her concept of *la mysterique* in her groundbreaking book Speculum of the Other Woman. Like so many French words, *la mysterique* is largely untranslatable. *La mysterique* signifies, simultaneously the mystic (and mysticism), the hysteric (and hysteria) mystery, and femaleness (denoted by the la). Most importantly, *la mysterique* is, for women, a space of liberation, a feminine locale outside of or beyond the patriarchal realm of the Symbolic. It is therefore important to understand how Irigaray reads the psychoanalytic Symbolic and how this understanding bleeds into and informs her critique of this realm by way of her theorization of *la mysterique*.

For Freud, women were the “dark continent”, an expanse of flesh unknowable and dangerous, a territory to be conquered but never fully known or exposed. Man is always blind to woman, and this, Irigaray notes, is due to Freud's (possibly inadvertent) theorization of sexual difference as based on the ocular – on what is visible. A difference is visible between man and woman – Freud's sees something on one and not on the other – which Irigaray feels references “the oldest of ‘phallocratic’ philosophical traditions”¹; man's visible sex organ, woman's more subtle genitalia. Irigaray argues that the discourse of Western culture elides sexual difference – that Freud specifically elides sexual difference because he refuses to investigate the historical lineages of

his datum or theories and maintains the sexualized law of discourse, reinforcing the phallogentrism as an eternal and universal value. It is Freud who, in theory, constructs woman as the "same" as man² (the other-as-same or other-of-the-same) and it is Freud who is heir to an ideology he never dares to call into question. And so this discourse Freud helps to construct or unveil³ produces the "masculine", whose identity is secured by that non-masculine "other" (woman). Thus in Western discourse there is no true "otherness", there is no otherness at all, just "woman" who has only ever been other-of-the-same, defined in relation to masculinity, defined as unreal and most assuredly unrepresentable. Through this, woman is naturally accorded status of "absence or negation of the male norm"⁴. For Irigaray, then, woman is outside the sphere of representation and in her absence (or as absence) she is unknowable in the representing world of the (Lacanian) Symbolic; she cannot exist except as mimicry, as reflection, as mirror.

For Irigaray woman is mirror for the man. She reflects his image back to him and is the projection of man's idea of himself within the Symbolic – woman works like the structure of language for man, signifying him because she is not him. He is man because he is not woman, but she is woman because she is...not. This is what Irigaray refers to as the specular logic of the Symbolic – where all reflects back the subjectivity of the man to man himself, especially in the case of language – a signpost of the phallic order, governed by the phallus, the structuring principle of the Symbolic. As mentioned, Irigaray sees women as unrepresentable in language, in the Symbolic. Woman is not fully there, but exists between the lines, between meanings. Irigaray says when woman speaks she always speaks as man: any speaking on the part of the subject is the speech of the male. Irigaray argues, therefore, that there is but one subject position, one column of subjectivity into which all are thrown. This is the subject position of the man/male/masculine. Woman is thus not the Other, but rather specifically the *man's* Other – his mirror – which is why woman exists outside of the patriarchal (phallic) discourse, unrepresentable in phallic discourse, and empty subject. In this economy of sexual *indifference* there are only men: the possessor of the phallus/penis and/or the defective, castrated man without: w/o-man. Here (in this Symbolic of sameness) women have no subjective status, but exist only for men as defective men (phallus-less) and as metonymy (virgin, mother, whore, etc). This indifference to difference resonates throughout *all* of the Symbolic order (culture), and creates the myth of the genderless subject. "I" is the genderless subject – that subject position that changes dependent up on the speaker. In the reality of the Symbolic, though, all subject positions are subtended by the masculine – the only legitimate subject position in this specular logic – and therefore "I" is always already a male "I". Irigaray argues that this genderless subject does not exist, that the masculine subtends every "I" and the space for women in discourse is an awkward or unavailable one. She is metonymy: the fertile soil upon which man erects the flag of his sovereign subjectivity, the inert nature from which his progeny (as same) will spew forth, the object of his future generations⁵, the mirror in which he sees and knows himself – she is all of these but is not subject in her own right.

In this way, then, "all theories of the subject have always been appropriated by the masculine"⁶, and any woman claiming subjectivity does so *as masculine*, as man, as trapped within the phallic Symbolic, "renouncing the specificity of her own relation to the imaginary"⁷. Without woman as reflecting the masculine, without woman as man's other, without representing that opaque matter which is there for appropriation or repression, the towering flagpole of subjectivity risks losing its balance, tumbling, crumbling from his foundations, falling flaccid on the empty field of subjective

attainment. And so what, then, if woman escapes? Flees? The male subjective erection dwindles, a soft flaccid crumbling subject-no-more. How unpleasant! Horrifyingly so. But it is Irigaray's aim to disturb the categories and concepts of familiarity, to release women from the shackles, to destabilize the otherwise secure realm of the patriarchal, phallic Symbolic. Irigaray urges women to flee and theorizes a place for them to go. She realizes that to attempt to establish a linguistic alternative one must communicate in the language of the oppressor, one must submit to the phallic order, to language, to the Symbolic. Woman, who is exiled, has the chance but only if she becomes the chaos that such an alternative language/discourse must be. Woman will be only if she sacrifices discursive coherence: to be and to witness the unspeakable. To be *la mystérique*.

La mystérique

It is in the unspeakableness of being woman that she comes to her mystical position, a position wherein she is equated with, or spoken of in the same fashion that the Mystics spoke of God. As with woman, so too the "divine cannot be spoken within a language given over to the representation of human"⁸. In the onto-theological discourses of the Symbolic God serves as mirror of man in the same way woman does, and both are denied the possibility of attaining a position in their own right. As to speak of woman is to make her man, so to speak of God is to make God (hu)man, and thus both are – in their difference or authenticity - exiled from the realm of the comprehensible Symbolic, where they can exist only as another element of the same. Irigaray argues "the mystic experience allows femininity to discover itself precisely through the deepest acceptance of patriarchal subjection"⁹ – through the recognition of the ultimate repression or non-existence of the feminine, woman can be lead to find a subject position for herself – and this acceptance of phallic/patriarchal completely destroys the foundations from which the power asserts itself and, as mentioned earlier, renders the phallus phlaccid. Accepting subjection is, in this model, liberation¹⁰.

The image of the suffering Christ can serve as an example of Irigaray's *la mystérique*. As Christ was the son of God, any assertion that her theory is essentialist at heart is overturned. It was Christ whose self-inflicted abjection opens a space of ultimate unfolding pleasure, breaking from the strict logic of the same, escaping the Symbolic. Of Christ as feminine Irigaray writes that "one man, at least, has understood her so well that he died in the most awful suffering. That most female of men, the Son"¹¹. Christ is thought of in Irigaray's imagings of *la mystérique*, as a figure of (near perfect) femininity and one who martyred himself before the throne of the Symbolic, in the name of woman or the feminine. If, in his suffering the Word was made flesh "it can only have been to make me (become) God in my jouissance"¹². Christ's crucifixion, his bloody painful inexorable death "opens up the path of redemption"¹³ for woman – it gives her a place/space to go.

Lars' *La mystérique*

Lars von Trier's Goldenheart Trilogy, a series of films related only by their portrayal of "naïve heroines", offers a clear example of the role of *la mystérique* as a pathway out of the stifling, patriarchal Symbolic for woman. In fact, two of the films – Breaking the Waves and Dancer in the Dark – seem to go so far as to posit woman in a Christ-like role, even referencing, at points, the

walk of Christ, burdened by the cross, to the scene of his own crucifixion. In the interest of clarity I will focus on Breaking the Waves to show how to Irigaray's theory of *la mysterique* can shed light on von Trier's film, wherein women are positioned the role of the most sacrificial (and thus, to paraphrase Irigaray, as that most feminine of men).

Breaking the Waves is von Trier's 1996 film, set in the Scottish Highlands in the 1970s. It centres on the story of Bess McNeill, resident of a small Highlands community, which is structured around the very strict and patriarchal Calvinist church. Bess is a simple and naïve girl, gentle at heart, innocent and kind, with a personal relationship to God. Bess marries Jan, an oil-man, an outsider to the community and church, and they spend the first few weeks of their marriage in bliss together. Soon, though, Jan must return to work on the oil platforms and Bess can barely handle his leaving. She falls to pieces before he can leave, and spends each day of his absence in conversation with God, Bess' voice deepening as she takes on the role of God in her own mind. She asks for strength initially and later begins to ask for Jan's return. When she finally feels she can handle it no more she bargains with God, saying she will do anything just to have Jan home. That day Jan is paralysed in an industrial accident on the platform and returns to the community hospital. Of course, Bess blames herself for Jan's accident and gives herself over to his whims and desires. Her devotion for and to Jan is deeper and more intense than many in the community come to feel is "sane" and so when Jan is no longer able to make love he urges Bess to take a lover, to sleep with other men and come back to him to share the details, she concurs. This way, Jan says, he can share in physical pleasure with her again. Thus begins the derailing of Bess' life and as she carries out Jan's request she believes she is partaking in the work of God, curing Jan of his debilitating injury.

In this film Bess (as an exemplar of "woman") is Freud's "dark continent", unknown and unknowable, shrouded in mystery, but it is from this place of mystery, of *la mysterique* that she can communicate both her repression and her liberation. It is in Bess's taking on of the bodily pleasures of sex in order to share with and save her husband that she displays her "mistrust for the dry desolation of reason", the desert wherein most of the rest of the world exists. Bess is set against both the stony backdrop of Scottish highlands, but also against the community that is so out of step with her way of seeing. Or perhaps more rightly it is Bess who is out of step with them. Von Trier shows the levels of investment community members have in the Symbolic realm, building up a sort of staircase of custodians of the status quo (which also happens to be, psychoanalytically that most patriarchal of realms the Symbolic). Bess is outside this realm, or if not *outside* perhaps hovering so near to the edges that her boundaries begin to blur; she is barely visible. Still ensconced within the Symbolic yet making strides to move outside are Bess's sister-in-law Dorothy and the community doctor, Dr. Phillips. When Bess' behavior with the men of surrounding communities becomes noticeably problematic, Dorothy and Dr. Phillips stage an intervention. Neither can comprehend why Bess is doing what she is doing, as there is an uncrossable gulf between Bess and those whose lives are fully mediated by the phallic governance of the Symbolic. In response to Bess' moving further away from that readable space, that ordered comprehensible rectangle of the Symbolic, Dorothy says to Bess "you are disappearing into a world of make-believe"¹⁴. Both Dorothy and Dr. Phillips have Bess' best interests in mind, but none can reach her, none can move to her level, none can escape the trap they work within, even though their love for her is so great.

Bess' community is an intensely patriarchal one, and her own self-sacrifice is a testament to the depth of the patriarchal power inherent in this Calvinist community's faith. Near the beginning of the film the priest, while officiating Jan and Bess' wedding, refers to the severe nature of the sect and their relationship to God. He says, by way of blessing: "Christ so loved the church and gave himself for her. We should love Christ, and give ourselves to him"¹⁵. This is the beginning, the first swing of a sacrificial hammer, which will nearly bludgeon the viewer with the horror of Bess' self-sacrifice, the lengths she is willing to go for love, the point of separation that begins to demarcate her from the rest of the community ensconced in the Symbolic.

In church the women and men sit separately and men are the only ones allowed to speak during services. This relation to faith, to God, is based on the model of the phallicly governed Symbolic, with a patriarchal understanding of the divine, wherein Man is created in God's image and so is like Man. Irigaray argues that this understanding of God in effect destroys God, repressing God in the Symbolic in the same way women are repressed and rendering Him (sic) no more than a mirror reflecting Man. God, like the hysteric, *la mystérique* or the naïve women of von Trier's films, resists and "goes beyond all representation, however schematic in its approximation"¹⁶. In the same way that woman is repressed/sublimated in the patriarchal discursive regime of language, so too is God – and this is abundantly visible in Bess' community (which is a stand-in for the Symbolic) where God is He, Law, condemner, a distant alien Father to us all. To think in another way, though, to become the hysterical, mystical, mystery femme – *la mystérique*, god – is to possibly "bring into existence a new Symbolic order, in which both the masculine and the feminine will be represented"¹⁷; represented in their incoherence, in their chaos, in a cacophony of glorious, explosive *jouissance*. This is how Bess experiences her *jouissance* in Breaking the Waves – in a manner incoherent to all who observe, in a manner that is so explosive and cacophonous it eventually kills her.

While the film Breaking the Waves makes clear the lengths, breadths and depths of sacrifice Bess will go to, the distance she covers in her flee from the Symbolic and into *la mystérique*, the viewer never loses sight of the sublime selflessness upon which her journey is based – the physical *jouissance*, both orgasmic and painful, that she experiences as she fully removes her body and mind from the clutches of the Symbolic, of language, of the Phallus. Bess gives her body over to the Symbolic, to men and the phallus, in an act of sacrifice for love, and also as a way to escape subjection through the most intense of subjections.

It is important to note the resistance Bess receives from both those who love her and those who merely want to dominate her. At one point in the film, distraught over Jan's leaving to work on the oil platform; Bess explodes and then crumples into a fit of hysterics, a firework of passions that is immediately redacted by slipping Bess some drugs. Those invested in the realm of the Symbolic – even those that love Bess and try to relate to her – are horrified at the sight of madness, at the loss of control, the lack of language, the moaning, groaning, convulsive shaking and tearing of the hair that can come from escaping order and entering into disorder, *jouissance*, chaos, the hysterical, mysterious *la mystérique*.

As Bess and her sacrifice demonstrate, this escape will not always be a pleasant one. As it is tied up with women's *jouissance* it is thus tied up with both pleasure and pain. Irigaray notes, and von Trier 's Bess exemplifies, that it is "pain which enables her to feel herself again and to gather her strength"¹⁸, it is through this pain which separates her from the 'others'; through it that she can move, escape, change, achieve. In the case of Bess specifically, she suffers immeasurably, and yet as her suffering and pain pull her further away from the community in which she lives, it simultaneously pulls her closer to God, so much so that God is within her, *is* her. She converses with God through herself, playing both roles; as God she castigates herself, threatens herself, says, "I giveth and I taketh away."

Here we see the simultaneous existence of *la mystérique* (Bess, conversing with and *as* God) and the patriarchal overlord of the Symbolic (God as heavy handed punisher: anthropomorphic, the Church as law). We come to understand that conflicting, contradictory path woman must traverse to leave the realm of her own oppression. In her flight from the Symbolic and toward God – *la mystérique* – woman is "torn apart in pain, fear, cries tears and blood that go beyond any other feeling"¹⁹, but, similarly in *jouissance*, there is mixed into this horror and pain a sense of yearning, of joy, of pleasure beyond the describable. We see this reflected in the passion of Jesus Christ, his flagellation and crucifixion, and von Trier gives us a feminine model in Bess. Speech fails her. Bess gives herself bodily to various men in order to please and save her love, Jan, and cries while engaged in the act. She feels pain and yet her joy is great at the ability she has to save – these contradictions and tensions between pleasure and pain abound in the film as they do in Irigaray's *la mystérique*, Bess is caught between the bliss and the torment of *jouissance*, between the hysteric and mysticism of *la mystérique*. She feels what she does is the work of God, her sacrifices help to heal Jan, and yet this work is so painful for her. Because of it she is ostracized, because of it she loses all contact with the world she formerly understood. She stands up in church and demands to know why women cannot speak. She is exiled and banished from the community. She is taunted by children, called a "tart" and a "whore". And yet through this work of God she builds a relationship to the "outside" – an "outside" which is secret, in deep oblivion, in accessible by intelligence of common sense, the ordered hallmarks of the Symbolic.

In fact, as the film rolls on Bess begins to speak less and less, aside from her attempts to access God. Bess is an abyss that has swallowed all verbs and nouns, all proper names and adjectives. She is simultaneously expanding and dissipating, making her way to the "most private chamber" of the feminine, of *la mystérique* which is open "only to one who is indebted to no possession for potency"²⁰ [no phallus] for here – in Bess's religious fervor, in *la mystérique* – the rules of the phallus do not apply. Here woman is wedded only to the "abolition of all power, all having, all being"²¹. Again this tripartite example of *la mystérique* is clear in Bess. She is not having – even her body is no longer to be hers – and by the end she has no being – at the end of the film she submits herself physically to the entire crew of a freighter, dying in the hospital with Jan's name falling from her lips. It is the last vestiges of phallic power that slip away as she leaves consciousness and slowly leaks out of the Symbolic to her liberation: it is the annihilation of the self in mysticism which is not death but rather an "annihilation of the phallic"²². Bess escapes through the ultimate sacrifice.

Many feminist critiques can be launched at a theory that calls for women to sublimate and subjugate themselves in order to achieve a liberatory position, but the fact remains that the feminine voice who speaks in the Lacanian Symbolic realm, as Irigaray made clear, is always already sublimated and subjugated. She is not, in fact; and her voice – the subject – is always masculine. The annihilation of women, then, in von Trier's films, and the call for ultimate sacrifice resulting in annihilation by Irigaray, is pure metaphor, perhaps calling for women to recognise their own, already existing, martyrdom and to use that martyrdom as a way of escape. This call to martyrdom is less a call and more, like most of psychoanalysis itself, a description of the way the world is at present. Irigaray's theory of *la mysterique* and von Trier's exemplification of that theory, gives us space to recognise the gendered order of subjectivity, the existence of (veiled?) sexual difference, and room to create new and more liberatory theories for all people. And I'd call that an example of feminism.

Notes

1. Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics. (London, New York: Methuen, 1985)_132
2. See Freud's Three Essays on Sexuality for more information on the "sameness" of biological sex between boys and girls. See also Feminine Sexuality.
3. and who's construction/unveiling Lacan finishes/takes up
4. Moi. (132)
5. in both senses of the term
6. Luce Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman (Ithica, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) 133
7. Ibid., (133)
8. Ibid., (8)
9. Moi. (137)
10. and this is a bone of contention amongst other feminists in terms of critiques of Irigaray's work. It seems to leave very little space for political organizing and progressive movements if liberation is meant to be martyrdom. To assume that this is the extent of Irigaray's argument, though, is to read in the shallowest sense her theory of *la mysterique*.
11. Irigaray. (199)
12. Ibid., (200)
13. Ibid., (200)

14. von Trier, Lars. Breaking the Waves. 1996
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., (197)
17. n-Marie Priest, "Woman as God, God as Woman: Mysticism, Negative Theology and Luce Irigaray," The Journal of Religion Vol. 83, No. 1 (Jan 2003): 2
18. aray. (198)
19. Ibid., (193)
20. Ibid., (196)
21. Ibid., (196)
22. Priest. (20)

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Breaking the Waves. Prod. Axel Helgeland. Dir. Lars von Trier. DVD. Zentropa Films, 1996.

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